

PANDAS IN PANAMA

BY RICHARD MITCHELL

Americans do not understand the world at a time when we face a critical need to understand foreign consumers, markets, customs, strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, our economic future depends on geographic literacy....

Without a thorough grasp of geography, we see the world from our own narrow perspective. ...The world is too competitive and dangerous to be a vague blur of memorized names and places. Without geography, we're nowhere.

—Gilbert M. Grosvenor



bankers just didn't *know* that bananas don't grow in sand, and, even worse, it never occurred to them to go out and find a geographer to tell them that.

Grosvenor starts by reporting the results of some poll in which some people located "Contras in Norway, nuclear weapons in Switzerland, pandas in Panama, the summer Olympics in Iraq, [and] the United States in Botswana." These he calls "extreme examples of geographic illiteracy [that] popped out of the mouths of American adults." The polltakers accosted "10,800 adults in nine countries," an average of 1,200 adults per country, which made the poll, you should be happy to know, "the largest of its kind."

When a dairy farmer happens to notice that not one geographer in ten can tell a Holstein from a Guernsey, he may shrug a little shrug, or, if he has acquired the nasty habit of reading op-ed pieces in the *New York Times*, he may even snort a little snort, but he does not break out into pious lamentations about the decline of the West and the end of civilization as we know it. He does not take pen in hand to announce to his fellow Americans that there are cows in Japan too and that we can hardly expect to compete with the Japanese while mired in dairy illiteracy. He does not wring his hands aloud, gloomily reminding us that we cannot hope to understand the peoples and cultures of the world unless we are correctly informed as to their cows. He does not darkly hint that not only prosperity but peace itself will have no chance if our schools continue the deplorable practice of neglecting cow study, which neglect he resoundingly demonstrates by pointing to the indisputable fact that not one school in ten thousand or so offers any cow courses whatsoever. In short, a dairy farmer keeps his own counsel and minds his own business. He is a splendid chap, and I like him a lot.

With geographers, it is otherwise. In fact, with most of those whose callings have become subjects in school, it is very

much otherwise. They seem truly to believe that if they "teach" it, then it is universally essential. The exceptions are the ones who impart such skills as accounting and advertising, who seem not at all perturbed that the public in general is unschooled in the tricks they're paid to reveal. Tax preparers do not moan and groan that no ordinary citizen can possibly fill out his simplified return, and plumbers seem never to call for universal plumbing literacy.

But the academic types are withering away in a buyers' market and must always be proclaiming that what they can impart is even more important than accounting and advertising, to say nothing of plumbing and, indeed, that it is "the key" to success in everything else, including accounting and advertising, maybe even plumbing, and also to world peace and the brotherhood of all mankind.

The epigraph above, a lament both melancholy and condescending, is taken from an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* by the president of the National Geographic Society. The piece is full of similar stuff, including the assertion that it was out of an ignorance of geography, rather than greed, that banks made big loans to little countries with no resources. Those naive

I suspect that it may also have been the *only* of its kind and that it was commissioned and paid for by people who are neither plumbers nor accountants and certainly not dairy farmers. And we can rest assured that if the poll had come out the "wrong" way—without ammunition for Grosvenor—we would never have heard of it.

For some reason or other, Grosvenor does not tell us exactly how many respondents put the pandas in Panama. Maybe he wants to protect us from the shock of a dreadful revelation, or maybe something else. It's too bad. Reasoning, which is the only thing left for those who cannot afford a poll, suggests that the world would be a vastly better place if about 25 percent of the adults of nine nations had put the pandas in Panama.

Consider: There you are, standing around in the shopping mall, minding your own business and hurting no one. Up to you, clipboard in hand, comes one of those smooth kids, working his way through tax-preparer school by taking the occasional poll. He is not even a prying busybody in his own right but only the hired tool of a prying busybody, and neither the lackey nor the master has your welfare in mind but somebody else's. And

BONNIE MACKAIN

he puts to you the following question, which must surely have looked like this: The natural habitat of the panda is in:

- (a) Samoa
- (b) Panama
- (c) Australia
- (d) China
- (e) Greenland

Now stop and think. He who asks this question—is he a seeker after truth, panting to know the whereabouts of the panda? He who pays this asker—is he looking for your help?

There is, of course, a more or less correct answer, but a thoughtful person can no more bring himself to check off a more or less correct answer than Baron Rothschild can put ice in his wine. Is there, perhaps, a *just* answer, an answer that, not the question, but the questioner deserves? Of course. In fact, there are four just answers. The four wrong ones. Thus it follows that in a world of thoughtful people, each of them would have chosen one of those four, which is also to say that about a quarter of them would have chosen Panama. Simple logic.

Alas. If only it had been so.

There are, in fact, people who have no idea where pandas come from and who don't care and who, when told by some geographer, will find the information of no special interest. There are even people who would rather not be told—yet again—where the summer Olympics were to be found, and if there are any who truly don't know, all we can do is envy them.

But in all such matters, we are not truly talking about knowledge—and certainly not about “understanding the world,” which Grosvenor considers dependent on being able to put the pandas in the right place—but about *information*. Nothing more.

All shortages of information are now called “illiteracies.” In every case, from the now-aging “computer illiteracy” to the *arriviste* “AIDS illiteracy,” these are not in any sense illiteracy but simply ignorance, ignorance of this or that—the condition in which every one of us, however expert in some other this or that, will spend his entire life.

If plumbers were to become afflicted with this inflated self-importance, they would call the rest of us plumbing illiterates. Legislatures would give them grants. They would establish Programs with Guide-

lines at Centers. And every toilet in the land would be clogged. Is it perhaps time for some people to get the hell out of academe?

Now consider this: You are going to imagine three lists. One is a complete list of all of the information you have ever been given, starting with the capitals of the states and so forth. Be careful. Information is fickle. It is not knowledge. Astronomers can neither divine nor deduce the names of the stars. It is only credulity that makes Grosvenor suppose that there are no atom bombs in Switzerland. And where will the pandas be two or three wars from now, when the *contras* in Tibet have pushed some borders about?

The second is a list (who could make it?) of the information that you haven't been given. All of it.

The third list contains all of the information that you have discovered for yourself and that would not have been around for others to hear unless you had discovered it.

Now behold in dismay: one little list, one infinite list, and one infinitesimal list. If you suspect, as I do, that there are some *contras* in Norway, be consoled to notice that List Two of Gilbert M. Grosvenor is just as infinite as yours.

Not all geographers, I hope, would hold that the meaning and worth of geography are to be found in the information that some of Grosvenor's poll subjects seem not to have had. Grosvenor himself shows that you can “see the world from your own narrow perspective” just as easily with a “thorough grasp of geography” as without it.

How, then, should you live? Should you devote your life to moving entries from list two to list one? When you have toted up enough geographical entries, will you thereupon “understand the world” and learn to compete with the Japanese? When you have found out the place of the panda, will that be enough? What about the platypus, the peccary, and the pangolin? How long a list will it take to put the mind in tune, and the reason in frame, to find, in other words, the only condition in which it is possible to understand anything?

Richard Mitchell is the author of Gift of Fire and is responsible for The Underground Grammarian, from which this article is drawn.

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